



## **Governor Sanders Delivers State of the State Address**

**LITTLE ROCK, Ark--**Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders delivered the State of the State Address after the convening of the 94th General Assembly Fiscal Session on Wednesday, April 10th.

The Governor's remarks as prepared are below:

Speaker Shepherd, President Hester, Constitutional Officers, members of the Supreme Court, distinguished Members of the General Assembly, my fellow Arkansans:

It is an honor to join you for my first State of the State address. It's been just over a year since I took office as our state's 47th Governor. And what a year it's been.

Compared to last year's inaugural address, today is a bit more low-key.

But what today lacks in fanfare, it makes up for in substance. Last year, I made promises. This year, I'm reporting results.

But I didn't do it alone. It was the partnership and work of this body that helped us bring transformational change. It wasn't always easy but it's something we can be proud of.

Even on the hard days the one thing we could always count on was the people of Arkansas.

One of the most difficult days since I took office was March 31st of last year, the day that tornadoes tore through Central Arkansas and Wynne.

I was in Wynne two days after, meeting with students and families and seeing the damage to the town's homes, businesses, and Wynne High School.

One of the stories I heard that day was about a group of high schoolers. After the storm passed, they went to see the damage at their school and saw that, unlike just about everything else, the flagpole was still standing. But the flags were gone.

They searched their town, tracked down their flag, and mounted it back on the flagpole. It's the same flagpole that's standing in front of the school today. Bent, but not broken.

In government, it's easy to forget the bigger picture. Let's never lose sight of the people we serve. And let's not forget why they elected us.

I came into office as Arkansas' first woman Governor and the youngest governor in the country.

But those aren't the data points that mattered. The ones I cared about were 48th in America for starting teacher pay; 45th in the nation for literacy, the highest tax burden in the region; the highest violent crime rate in the nation.

Arkansas had deep, entrenched problems when I took office. We weren't going to solve them with the same failed policies that got us here in the first place.

So we charted a new course last year. That meant change – and sometimes a lot of it. It made some people uncomfortable.

But we are building a better, safer, stronger Arkansas. In fact, our work is making Arkansas a model for the nation.

Our priorities are reflected in our budget.

Hard as it may be, I made a promise to the people of Arkansas that we would work to slow the out-of-control growth of government. With the help of my Cabinet, we kept it.

This year's budget increases spending by only 1.76%, far below the 3% year-over-year increase we've averaged in recent years.

Send me a budget that funds critical services for Arkansans while slowing the growth of government and I will sign it.

That's because as revenues climb and costs slow, we'll have room to cut taxes. We've already done so by more than \$300 million.

I'm committed to responsibly phasing out our state income tax rate and letting everyone keep more of their hard-earned money.

Tax cuts are just some of the bipartisan legislation we've come together to pass. We enacted the Protect Act, Death by Delivery, universal licensing reform, social media protections for kids, and more, all with support from both sides of the aisle.

There are people outside this chamber – and even a few inside – who want to distract us from these commonsense reforms. Let's not let them.

There is a lot of wisdom in the marble halls of the Capitol, but I've learned even more from spending time with people from Magnolia to Mulberry, and Benton to Blytheville.

Which is why I traveled more than 16,000 miles in Arkansas last year to host more than 250 events. I remember holding a town hall in Heber Springs. Taking questions, I was surprised when half the crowd sounded like they'd just come out of the Sopranos central casting.

I thought – do people from the Northeast just have a way of talking over everyone? Or do we have our own Little Italy on the shores of Greers Ferry? Turns out, the answer is yes and yes.

As I mingled with the crowd afterward, I figured out the reason. These newcomers love our freedom-loving state and our people.

And they're not just in Heber. I've met transplants everywhere I've gone. We're even getting a former Kentucky Wildcat in Fayetteville. Welcome to Arkansas, Coach Calipari!

We added 21,000 new Arkansans last year. Those newcomers were joined by companies from all over the country and the world.

I traveled to Europe and Asia to pitch businesses on Arkansas. They liked what they heard. Companies proposed more than \$1 billion in new investments last year.

Companies like Rafael, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin are turning Camden into the arsenal of freedom, supplying Israel's Iron Dome, America's Marine Corps, and service members across the globe.

Dassault Falcon is adding 800 new jobs here in Little Rock. Mississippi County is now the top steel-producing county in America. Walther Arms is helping us defend our rights with their expansion in Fort Smith. And companies are making investments left and right in South Arkansas lithium.

Our national economy is dragging. Blue states are shrinking. But Arkansas is roaring ahead.

That starts with education, my top priority. I worked with this body to pass Arkansas LEARNS and launch the largest transformation of Arkansas education in modern history – and the largest single investment in our public schools ever.

Before this year, our teachers were some of the worst-paid in the country. In many districts, there wasn't a single educator making \$50,000.

LEARNS raised starting teacher pay from \$36,000 to \$50,000 and gave every teacher at least a \$2,000 raise. We went from 48th in the country to top five overnight.

Before this year, only a third of Arkansas third graders could read at grade level. LEARNS deployed 120 literacy coaches to public schools across the state, targeting at-risk students with the attention our kids need and deserve.

Before this year, Arkansas families had no choice where to send their kids to school. LEARNS expanded education freedom to more than five thousand students in just one year. 50 percent of those students have learning disabilities.

We have a few EFA families with us today, including Colonel Chad Bridges from the Arkansas National Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade

Combat Team, his wife Kari, and their two kids. I met Chad and some other Arkansas Guardsmen during my trade mission to Germany last year.

While there, Chad brought up the LEARNS Act and mentioned that his family was taking advantage of the program to help them send their son, Carsten, who has Down Syndrome, to Compass Academy in Conway.

Now, nearly nine months into the school year, Carsten couldn't be doing better. He's never been the type of kid who let his differences get in the way of doing what he knows he can do. At Compass Academy, he's surrounded by supportive staff who believe in him just as much as he does.

We ask a lot of the moms and dads who protect our communities and freedoms and keep us safe. It's important that we recognize their service and their sacrifice and show them our support.

Year One of the LEARNS Act targeted the most at-risk students in our state. But education freedom is for everyone, and soon, Education Freedom Accounts will be too.

I visited Harvest Time Academy in Fort Smith last week to announce that EFA applications for next year are now open to more families: the children of first responders, law enforcement, veterans, and any student attending a "D" rated school.

In just that first day of the application period, we got more than 1,800 new sign-ups. The numbers have only climbed since, and 25% of new applicants are the children of active-duty military personnel and veterans.

Educational freedom is the least we can do for those who put everything on the line for our freedom. This time next year, we will have universal education freedom for the first time in Arkansas history.

Send me a budget that continues to fully fund the LEARNS Act, and I will sign it.

Education was my first priority, but it was far from my only one. For too many Arkansans, the thought of taking your kids to the park or stopping at a gas station at night is a scary one.

The reason is simple: some of our leaders think it's compassionate to coddle criminals. They need a reality check.

I've been to the southern border and seen how Joe Biden's "compassion" lets the cartels traffic millions of people and deadly drugs into our country.

Just last week, Arkansas State Police seized half a pound of fentanyl in a routine traffic stop. That's enough to kill a town of 100,000 people – a town bigger than the size of Fort Smith.

And we've all read far too many reports here in Arkansas about violent, repeat offenders who are sentenced to decades in prison, let out early, and then go on to commit again.

This isn't compassion. It's cruelty. And we've all had enough.

Last week, I thanked 40 Arkansas guardsmen before they headed out for a mission to the southern border. They know the gravity of the security and humanitarian crisis we're facing and all of them volunteered to go – many for their second time.

Last year, the legislature passed, and I signed Death by Delivery, which charges fentanyl dealers with murder if the drugs they traffic cause a fatal overdose.

And we came together again to pass the Protect Act. No more catch and early release of violent repeat offenders. In Arkansas, we will keep the most dangerous criminals off our streets.

We're paving the way to build a new, 3,000-bed prison. And in the meantime, we've opened up 1,000 beds in our existing capacity to take pressure off local jails.

Arkansas State Police are on the front lines of that effort. That's why I allocated \$3.8 million in my budget to replenish their ranks.

When we think of state troopers, we often think of them chasing down criminals or launching drug busts. That's certainly part of the job, but it's not all Magnum P.I.

Late one night this January, Trooper Brandon Bird was on patrol on I-40.

He came across an older man, sitting in his vehicle and out of gas. Bird sat with the man as he called a family member, who couldn't come pick the gentleman up until the next morning. So, Trooper Bird drove the man to the nearest hotel.

When they got there, Bird found out that the man had no money. So, he paid \$100 out of his own pocket for the man to have a warm room for the night.

Brandon felt like he was just doing his job. But the reality of the situation soon sunk in. It was dark and cold. The man had no gas. If Bird hadn't been there, the man could have frozen to death.

Trooper Bird is with us today and I want to thank him and all of our law enforcement for their service to our state. Brandon's story is remarkable, but not uncommon for the exceptional men and women of State Police.

When the Left calls to defund the police, these are the troopers they want to get rid of. We don't need less of Trooper Bird - we need more like him.

That's why we've increased ASP ranks by more than 17% in just one year since I've taken office. And it's why I'm working to grow the force by more than 100 additional officers.

Send me a budget that funds our police, and I will sign it.

Public safety and education – when we crack those problems, a low cost of living won't be the only thing bringing newcomers to Arkansas. And they're hardly our only accomplishments.

I was the first governor in the country to kick a Chinese state-owned company off our farmland and out of our state.

We launched a comprehensive Workforce Strategy to get Arkansans back in the job market.

Arkansas LEARNS plays a big role in that, growing Career and Technical Education and ending the lie that if you don't go to college, you are somehow less-than.

We're making progress on our maternal health crisis. Each year, 1,100 women in our state never even see a doctor until they're in labor.

I signed an Executive Order to help women access the healthcare they need, because we know healthier women mean healthier babies.

Study after study shows that too much social media exposure leaves our kids anxious and depressed. Suicide rates for young teens have tripled since 2007. Depression among teenagers is up 150%. 30% of teenage girls now seriously consider suicide.

We were one of the first states to pass legislation protecting kids from dangerous and addictive social media. But we can't stop there. It's time to start a conversation and make this issue one of our

next big priorities.

Experts suggest goals like no smartphones before high school; no social media before 16; phone-free schools; and more outdoor play and childhood independence.

Big Tech, just like Joe Camel, says it's kids' right to use their addictive products. I disagree. Just as Arkansas led on education, we will lead on this.

Big Tech might take us to court, but we'll fight them. Because our children's future depends on it.

We banned indoctrination in our schools, nonsense words like "birthing person," and men in women's sports.

To improve Arkansans' quality of life, my husband, Bryan, is spearheading the Natural State Initiative to grow outdoor recreation and tourism.

Already, we're smashing tourism records left and right. Tourism revenue in each month of 2023 set a new record, and 2024 is on track to break records again.

We live in one of the most beautiful states in America. It's time the rest of the world finds out about it.

Amid all this progress, we had challenges too.

We're just over a year past the March 31st tornadoes.

With us today is Pastor Eddie Miller, from Jacksonville. I met Pastor Miller the day after his church was destroyed in the storm.

When I visited, most of the structure was gone. Pastor Miller led us deep into the sanctuary where the roof had caved in. Miraculously, there was still one wall standing. On it hung three wooden crosses.

Pastor Miller, my husband, Bryan, and a few local legislators put our arms around each other and prayed.

Prayed for strength. Prayed for resilience. Prayed that this community, though bent, would not break.

A year later, by the grace of God and with the sweat of his congregation, Pastor Miller's church walls are back up.

The rebuilding isn't done yet. But when it's finished, it'll be better than what stood there before – a testament to our grit and to God's eternal love.

The greatest privilege of this job is being with the people of Arkansas, who no matter what will never be broken.

We are humble and we are gracious. We work hard and we take care of each other. We put our trust in our families and our faith in God.

May we never forget who we are and who we serve. And let us never be afraid to charge boldly ahead.

God bless you and may God bless the great State of Arkansas. Thank you.

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